Avoiding Copyright Infringement
Cyber Security Tip ST05-004

Although copyright may seem to be a purely legal issue, using unauthorized files could have security implications. To avoid prosecution and minimize the risks to your computer, make sure you have permission to use any copyrighted information, and only download authorized files.

How does copyright infringement apply to the internet?

Copyright infringement occurs when you use or distribute information without permission from the person or organization that owns the legal rights to the information. Including an image or cartoon on your web site or in a document, illegally downloading music, and pirating software are all common copyright violations. While these activities may seem harmless, they could have serious legal and security implications.

How do you know if you have permission to use something?

If you find something on a web site that you'd like to use (e.g., a document, a chart, an application), search for information about permissions to use, download, redistribute, or reproduce. Most web sites have a "terms of use" page that explains how you are allowed to use information from the site (see US-CERT's terms of use for an example). You can often find a link to this page in the site's contact information or privacy policy, or at the bottom of the page that contains the information you are interested in using.

There may be restrictions based on the purpose, method, and audience. You may also have to adhere to specific conditions about how much information you are allowed to use or how the information is presented and attributed. If you can't locate the terms of use, or if it seems unclear, contact the individual or organization that holds the copyright to ask permission.

What consequences could you face?

- Prosecution - When you illegally download, reproduce, or distribute information, you risk legal action. Penalties may range from warnings and mandatory removal of all references to costly fines. Depending on the severity of the crime, jail time may also be a possibility. To offset their own court costs and the money they feel they lose because of pirated software, vendors may increase the prices of their products.
- Infection - Attackers could take advantage of sites or networks that offer unauthorized downloads (music, movies, software, etc.) by including code into the files that would infect your computer once it was installed (see Understanding Hidden Threats: Corrupted Software Files and Understanding Hidden Threats: Rootkits and Botnets for more information). Because you wouldn't know the source or identity of the infection (or maybe that it was even there), you might not be able to easily identify or remove it. Pirated software with hidden Trojan horses is often advertised as discounted software in spam email messages (see Why is Cyber Security a Problem? and Reducing Spam for more information).

References
- U.S. Copyright Office - http://www.copyright.gov/
- Copyright on the Internet - http://www.fplc.edu/tfield/copynet.htm

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